

# interpretation

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# interpretation

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NIETZSCHE AS COSMOLOGIST:  
THE IDEA OF THE ETERNAL RECURRENCE AS A  
COSMOLOGICAL DOCTRINE AND SOME ASPECTS OF ITS  
RELATION TO THE DOCTRINE OF THE WILL TO POWER

JERRY H. COMBEE

In the last speech of part 2 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,<sup>1</sup> Zarathustra tells his friends that there is still something more he could tell them. Evidently Zarathustra's final teaching has not been revealed; perhaps it is that teaching is incomplete by itself. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche reports that when he "found Zarathustra III" he was "finished," and he also says that "the fundamental conception of this work (Zarathustra)" is "the idea of the eternal recurrence."<sup>2</sup> The first speech of part 3 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* contains what appears to be a dramatic re-creation on a much grander scale of the occasion of Nietzsche's finding of the idea of the eternal recurrence as described in *Ecce Homo*;<sup>3</sup> in the second speech of part 3, Zarathustra first reveals his teaching on the eternal recurrence, though not to his friends.<sup>4</sup> Relying on this passage in *Zarathustra* and certain others in other works,<sup>5</sup> the essence of the idea of the eternal recurrence may be distilled into the following proposition: all things that can occur have occurred and will recur in the same succession an infinite number of times.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, 1954); hereafter cited as *Zarathustra*.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1966), p. 295 ("Thus Spoke Zarathustra, A Book for All and None," 1); hereafter cited as *Ecce Homo*. It has been argued that this doctrine was really not new with Nietzsche; see, e.g., Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago, 1949), "Nietzsche's Revival of the Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence." Such arguments are well considered and refuted in Joan Stambaugh, *Nietzsche's Thought of Eternal Return* (Baltimore, 1972), *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche found the idea while on a walk when he stopped before a powerful pyramidal rock.

<sup>4</sup> He reveals it to a group of sailors, whom he calls bold searchers and researchers; some sailors were earlier depicted as shooters of rabbits. What he reveals is a vision and riddle in which he tells a dwarf, who is the spirit of gravity, about the eternal recurrence. See *Zarathustra*, pp. 241-42, 267-70 (pt. 2, aph. 18; pt. 3, aph. 2).

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1967), p. 549; hereafter cited as *Will to Power*. Also see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche*, aph. 2.

<sup>6</sup> As Arthur C. Danto has emphasized, the doctrine is not that very *similar* things recur, but rather that the *exact same* things recur. See his *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York, 1965), p. 204.

## I

Nietzsche had an intention, which he never fulfilled, to write a book entitled *The Eternal Recurrence*. In a note of this title, made in connection with his plan to write a book entitled *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche presents the following outline:

*The Eternal Recurrence. A Prophecy*

1. Presentation of the doctrine and its *theoretical* presuppositions and consequences.
2. Proof of the doctrine.
3. Probable consequences of its being *believed* (it makes everything *break open*).
  - a) Means of enduring of it;
  - b) Means of disposing of it.
4. Its place in history as a *mid-point*.  
 Period of greatest danger.  
 Foundation of an oligarchy *above* peoples and their interests: education to a universally human politics.  
 Counterpart of Jesuitism.<sup>7</sup>

This not unenigmatic outline does make one thing clear: The idea of the eternal recurrence is not just a moral doctrine, but a cosmological one as well.<sup>8</sup>

As a moral doctrine, the eternal recurrence is bound up with Nietzsche's project, or hope, for the Superman. By calling the idea of eternal recurrence "moral," I mean first of all that Nietzsche presents the eternal recurrence as something to be willed:<sup>9</sup> will for all things that can happen to have happened and to happen again an infinite number of times. Phrased imperatively, the doctrine amounts to a test of the degree of one's affirmation of what is. One who wills eternal recurrence has not sought to escape immanent being via otherworldly visions. By calling the idea of eternal recurrence "moral," I mean, second of all, that Nietzsche presents the eternal recurrence as something to be believed. As a belief, it bestows cosmic significance upon the particular of the present. In order to act in a manner consistent with belief in eternal recurrence, it would be imperative to so "act (or so be) that you would

<sup>7</sup> *Will to Power*, pp. 544-55.

<sup>8</sup> This distinction, although not in these exact terms, is common in secondary treatments of the doctrine. See, e.g., Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, p. 203, also contrasting pp. 203-9 with pp. 209-13; Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, N.J., 1950), contrasting pp. 279-87 to pp. 287-88; and Lowith, *Meaning in History*, p. 222.

<sup>9</sup> The adjective "moral" is hence justified if only because Nietzsche himself says that "willing as such" should be included "within the sphere of morals." See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1966), p. 27 (pt. 1, aph. 19); hereafter cited as *Beyond Good and Evil*.

be willing to act exactly the same way (or be exactly the same thing) an infinite number of times over."<sup>10</sup>

This differs from willing eternal recurrence, for it involves acting with recognition of eternal recurrence as a fact beyond one's will.<sup>11</sup> As belief, the idea of eternal recurrence gives the lie to any notion of the world having a purpose, meaning, or final state of any kind; consequently, the responsibility for whatever meaning the universe is to have must be borne by man, whose every act has occurred and will occur again an infinite number of times. As belief, then, the moral aspect of the idea verges on the notion of the eternal recurrence as a cosmological doctrine.

By calling the idea of the eternal recurrence a cosmological doctrine, I mean, first of all, that the idea is a theoretical idea; it is one which has theoretical presuppositions and consequences, an idea for which one can at least try to give proofs<sup>12</sup>—an idea, therefore, which in some sense can be spoken of as an allegedly true description of objective reality.<sup>13</sup> This much is clear from the outline. But by "cosmology" something more has traditionally been meant: an account of all things as one, an

<sup>10</sup> Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, p. 212. Kaufmann (*Nietzsche*, pp. 283-84) objects to this understanding of the doctrine, but Danto appears to reflect accurately the passage he quotes from a Nietzschean fragment. Kaufmann seems correct, however, in urging the misleading character of a comparison of Nietzsche's doctrine to Kant's categorical imperative, whatever the superficial formal resemblance may be.

<sup>11</sup> Lowith (*Meaning in History*, p. 222) argues that wherever Nietzsche "tries to develop his doctrine rationally, it breaks asunder in two irreconcilable pieces: in a presentation of eternal recurrence as an objective fact, to be demonstrated by physics and mathematics, and in a quite different presentation of it as a subjective hypothesis, to be demonstrated by its ethical consequences." If there is a contradiction and if the above analysis of the ideal of eternal recurrence as a moral doctrine is correct, then there is also a contradiction within the doctrine as moral, i.e., between the willing of eternal recurrence and the belief in it. It is not clear, however, that there necessarily is a contradiction. Willing eternal recurrence need not entail the necessity for it happening, nor need it entail the opposite; "willing" could mean simply "wishing."

<sup>12</sup> Danto argues (*Nietzsche as Philosopher*, pp. 204-5) that if the doctrine "is to receive evidential support, it must be through some evidential support of premises which then entail the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence." It is true that Nietzsche's proof for the doctrine is deductive. However, only some of the premises are established inductively. Others are established a priori, i.e., through avoiding the law of noncontradiction; see, e.g., point (3) of the summary on p. 45 below.

<sup>13</sup> The adjective "theoretical" as used here is synonymous with "scientific" in the analyses of the doctrine in Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, p. 203, and Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, pp. 287-88. "Theoretical" is perhaps preferable if it enables one not to miss that Nietzsche was not simply appealing to the established science of physics in his day. It would be much more accurate to view his effort in this regard as an immanent critique of the existing science of physics; involved in his doctrine, for example, was a rejection of the Second Law of Thermodynamics and the mechanistic conception.

account of the intrinsic order which makes the world a whole. As the cosmological aspect of the doctrine is explored, it will become clear that this description, too, fits the idea of the eternal recurrence.<sup>14</sup>

## II

In the first speech of part 3 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, an hour again<sup>15</sup> speaks to Zarathustra, asserting that Zarathustra is now going his way to "greatness." Aphorism 212 of *Beyond Good and Evil* deals with the concept of greatness. The greatness of philosophers has consisted in their creation of new horizons for man; in this task, they have taken their bearings by the concept of greatness on the horizon of their times, defining the new in opposition to the old. Nietzsche gives a brief statement of the new idea of greatness as a philosopher of the future would define it; it is a statement which takes its bearings in part by opposing the herd morality of modern egalitarianism, and it is almost a recapitulation of the speech of the hour on greatness:<sup>16</sup>

He shall be greatest who can be loneliest, the most concealed, the most deviant, the human beyond good and evil, the master of his virtues, he that is overrich in will. Precisely this shall be called greatness: being capable of being as manifold as whole, as ample as full.<sup>17</sup>

This emphasis on manifoldness, wholeness, amplexness, and fullness is in opposition to the specialization or compartmentalization which Nietzsche believed characterizes modern times.<sup>18</sup> One can see an obvious manifestation of this trend in the modern theoretical sciences; a sign of it has been the decline of cosmological speculation. This decline is directly related to the rise of the most spectacularly successful part of the new science which came into being in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—modern physics. The relation might be seen as having three aspects: according to one view of modern physics:<sup>19</sup>

1. The founders of modern physics insisted that the certainty attained in mathematics be sought in physics. It was to be sought by making physics mathematical. The goal of certainty and the consequent

<sup>14</sup> In part, this becomes clear by seeing the relation between the idea of the eternal recurrence and the idea of the will to power as an alternative ontological conception of the mechanistic-materialistic. Danto (*Nietzsche as Philosopher*, ch. 8) explicates the will to power doctrine as ontology; it is strange that he neglects to relate the idea of the eternal recurrence to it.

<sup>15</sup> An hour also speaks to Zarathustra in the last speech of pt. 2.

<sup>16</sup> To see the aphorism as a recapitulation of the speech of the hour on greatness, it is necessary to read more of the aphorism than is quoted here.

<sup>17</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 139 (aph. 212).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137 (aph. 212).

<sup>19</sup> See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953), pp. 169-77. See also Richard Kennington, "René Descartes," in *History of Political Philosophy* (Chicago, 1963), pp. 379-96.

making of physics seemed to require, at least, the abandonment of previous teleological conceptions of the world. It was felt that such conceptions in large part accounted for the failure of traditional philosophy to attain certain knowledge and to combine knowledge patterned after mathematics with a teleological conception.<sup>20</sup> In place of a teleological conception, a mechanistic conception was substituted—a view of the universe as material atoms in aimless motion transferred by collision with one another and describable in terms of inexorable laws capable of mathematical statement.<sup>21</sup> Now this mechanistic conception is indeed a cosmological conception, but it tended to become unquestioned, as the demand for certainty and hence a mathematical approach achieved the status of a methodological axiom.

2. Mathematics, it was thought, owed its certainty to being a human construct: i.e., we can know what we make. But this meant that mathematical physics was fundamentally a human construct and owed its certainty precisely to that fact. Consequently, knowledge, in the traditional sense, of a correspondence between the subject (or mind) and the object (or reality) could no longer be the goal of physics; this conclusion also followed from the fact that the mechanistic conception eliminated all mind from the world and hence made any notion of a correspondence or even interaction between mind and reality incomprehensible. The goal substituted for knowledge of nature was mastery of nature. The achievement of this goal, in turn, demanded experiments in which the theoretical constructs could be tested; in experimental situations the senses could be used to determine whether one could indeed control nature to achieve the results that had been hypothesized by taking one's bearings from the theoretical constructs. Since the whole cannot be "sensed" in this way, cosmology, even in some redefinition as mastery of the whole, ceases to be a meaningful goal of the scientific endeavor, or at least becomes a not entirely respectable one methodologically.

3. A true cosmology must be capable of comprehending human beings, which after all are part of the whole in some sense. Could the mechanistic conception be extended to man? In light of certain attempts made in that direction, it seems safe to say that the answer is no, unless it be bought at the price of a monstrous distortion of the phenomena. But this meant that science could not explain its own doings—not even its passion for mastery, much less any sort of "knowledge."

If this depiction of modern science as anti-cosmological is accurate, then it should not seem strange to try to view Nietzsche as in some way

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<sup>20</sup> See Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 171-72.

<sup>21</sup> In ancient times, of course, very similar conceptions had been developed by the Democritean-Epicurean schools. What made the modern conception unique and productive of vastly different consequences was the combination of a mechanistic conception with mathematics as the pattern for knowledge. See Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 169-72.

the bad cosmological conscience of modern science,<sup>22</sup> nor should it surprise us to hear the hour of the first speech of part 3 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* say to Zarathustra:

One must learn to *look away* from oneself in order to see *much*: this hardness is necessary to every climber of mountains.

But the lover of knowledge who is obtrusive with his eyes—how could he see more of all things than their foregrounds? But you, O Zarathustra, wanted to see the ground and background of all things; hence, you must climb over yourself—upward, up until even your stars are *under* you.<sup>23</sup>

Zarathustra soon reveals that such hard maxims as the above are his own, i.e., Nietzsche's. It is perhaps surprising to hear a psychologist<sup>24</sup> say such things; but Nietzsche was a peculiar kind of psychologist and would have himself been guilty of his charge against modernity of specialization<sup>25</sup> if he had not been more than a psychologist.

Nietzsche as psychologist explains all psychic phenomena in terms of the will to power; he reduces all psychic phenomena to the self, the self to the body, and the body to the will to power. It is that last reduction which enables him to avoid the crudities to which materialism usually succumbs when trying to account for the human things; i.e., his "materialism" is peculiarly "spiritual." In the final analysis, however, Nietzsche is not a materialist at all. He regarded materialistic atomism as "one of the best refuted theories there are," maintaining that "Boscovich has taught us to abjure the belief in the last part of the earth that 'stood fast'—the belief in 'substances,' in 'matter,' in the earth-residuum and particle-atom."<sup>26</sup>

Following Boscovich, Nietzsche wants to try to see all reality as consisting not of material atoms but of centers of force.<sup>27</sup> He goes beyond Boscovich in that he tries to understand all force (all energy, all motion) as will-force, as will to power,<sup>28</sup> which is an alternative mode of causal explanation to the mechanistic mode of what has been called "billiard-ball" causality.<sup>29</sup> Under such an interpretation, the world would consist of nothing but will to power,<sup>30</sup> which is not to say, however, that it consists of nothing but spirit.<sup>31</sup> If Nietzsche could carry out this program, then he would be able to succeed where the mechanistic conception had failed. The human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate (if these words

<sup>22</sup> See *Beyond Good and Evil*, par. 1, sentence 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Zarathustra*, p. 265 (pt. 3, aph. 1).

<sup>24</sup> See *Ecce Homo*, pp. 266-69 ("Why I Write Such Good Books," 5, 6).

<sup>25</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 137 (aph. 212).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20 (aph. 12).

<sup>27</sup> See aphas. 12 and 36 of *Beyond Good and Evil*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48 (aph. 36).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 48 (aphs. 21, 36).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48 (aph. 36); *Will to Power*, p. 550.

<sup>31</sup> See aph. 12 of *Beyond Good and Evil*.

still have any meaning), could be explained in the same terms. What is most important is that now science could explain its own doings, its drive for mastery of nature, in the same terms as those in which nature would be explained—namely, will to power—for Nietzsche had already attempted to show that the doctrine of the will to power can explain or comprehend all science or philosophy.<sup>32</sup>

Nietzsche accepted provisionally that the mechanistic conception is capable of explaining or interpreting sense experience; he thought, however, that the will-to-power conception might prove equally successful in this regard were it tried.<sup>33</sup> But ultimately he could not take this ability to explain or interpret sense experience as the final test, for materialistic atomism is more consistent with sense experience, which does indeed tell us that there is “substance” or “matter”, solidity or impenetrability, whereas Nietzsche’s conception denies just this.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, it was necessary for Nietzsche to make a dialectical attack on the mechanistic conception by showing that it is self-contradictory.

According to one view, the mechanistic conception was adopted by modern physics because it was thought to be non-teleological. Nietzsche argued that the mechanistic conception does have the consequence of leading to a final state—the goal of an equilibrium that involves duration, immutability, the once-and-for-all. He seems to have had in mind the second law of thermodynamics, which asserts that the universe is moving inexorably towards a state of “heat death” in which all differences of temperature will be leveled and cosmic energy, though indestructible and quantitatively the same, will be uniformly dissipated throughout space.<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche accepts as decisive against the mechanistic conception the fact that such a final state has never been reached: “That a state of equilibrium is never reached proves that it is not possible.”<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche’s argument on this point is not altogether clear, but perhaps it can be expressed and elaborated as follows: he maintained (as did mechanistic physics) that time is infinite, that “the concept ‘temporal infinity of the world in the past’” is not self-contradictory, and that its opposite cannot be maintained without contradiction.<sup>37</sup> This means that there have already been an infinite number of chances for a final state to be reached. If a final state is possible, it has a probability greater than zero. Given an

<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20, 30, 47-48 (aphs. 12, 30, 36).

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.*, aphis. 12, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Reliance for this statement of the law is placed upon Milic Capek, *Philosophical Impact of Contemporary Physics* (Princeton, N.J., 1961). p. 128. Capek argues (p. 129) that since this law is only a statistical law, given an infinity of chances a decrease of entropy is not impossible. But does not the once-for-all character of the law contradict Capek’s argument?

<sup>36</sup> *Will to Power*, pp. 547-49.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 548.

infinite number of chances, any event whose probability is greater than zero, no matter how slightly greater, must occur and indeed must occur an infinite number of times.<sup>38</sup> Since a final state has not occurred, it is not possible—i.e., its probability is not greater than zero.

If a final state is not possible, then there are only two possibilities left: either the world has the requisite energy, motion, and force for infinite novelty or it does not, in which case one is left with a concept of infinite repetitiveness or circularity—i.e., eternal recurrence.<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche claims that “the law of the conservation of energy demands eternal recurrence.”<sup>40</sup> He maintains that the very concept of force is incompatible with the idea of infinite force: “the world, as force, may not be thought of as unlimited, for it *cannot* be so thought of.”<sup>41</sup> It follows that infinite novelty is not possible; by process of elimination, eternal recurrence is proved. And the mechanistic conception, in that it entails the notion of final state, is proved false. The superiority of the will-to-power conception, at least when it asserts that reality consists of force and only of force, is established because it is consistent with the idea of the eternal recurrence.

All this may be summarized as follows:<sup>42</sup>

1. The world is a certain definite quantity of force and contains a certain definite number of centers of force. (It is necessary to see the world as consisting of force or centers of force, which Nietzsche understands as will to power, instead of matter or material atoms; the former is consistent with eternal recurrence; the latter is not because it, as part of the mechanistic conception, has the consequence of a final state which is not possible. It is necessary to see the world as consisting of a certain definite quantity of force or containing a certain definite number of centers of force because the idea of infinite force is a contradiction.)
2. There are a calculable number of possible combinations, configurations, or arrangements of the force in the universe. (Again, this follows from the concept of infinite force being a contradiction.)
3. Time is infinite. (This is maintained on the grounds that it and its corollary, the temporal infinity of the world in the past, are not contradictions, and that the opposite cannot be maintained without contradiction.)

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<sup>38</sup> See Capek, *Philosophical Impact of Contemporary Physics*, pp. 126-27.

<sup>39</sup> *Will to Power*, pp. 546-47.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 547.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* Perhaps Nietzsche's argument is that when we speak of force, power, or energy we do so meaningfully only when we can specify force *for what*, power or energy *to do what*, meaning a definite and therefore finite thing: thus the idea of infinite force, it might be argued, is contradictory.

<sup>42</sup> See *Will to Power*, pp. 548-49.

4. Every possible combination must at some time or another be realized, and be realized an infinite number of times. (Given an infinite number of chances, any event whose probability is greater than zero, however slightly greater, must occur at some point, and indeed must occur an infinite number of times.)

5. Between every combination and its next recurrence all other possible combinations would have to occur. (Between every combination and its recurrence is an infinite number of time instants or changes, and therefore every combination whose probability is greater than zero must occur in the interval.)

6. Each of these combinations conditions the entire sequence of combinations in the same series. (This is true because if the exact combination of forces in the universe is known for any one moment, in principle the next and all future and all past combinations can be predicted.<sup>43</sup>)

7. Therefore there is a circular movement of absolutely identical series that has repeated itself an infinite number of times and will repeat itself an infinite number of times.

#### IV

According to Nietzsche, "The two most extreme modes of thought—the mechanistic and the Platonic—are reconciled in the eternal recurrence: both are ideals."<sup>44</sup> The idea of the eternal recurrence is mechanistic in the sense that it, and the requisite will-to-power conception, more adequately meet the ideal standard of no teleology which the founders of modern science laid down and for the sake of which, in one view, the mechanistic conception was adopted. Also, the idea of the eternal recurrence does not deny the place of certainty in science. Out of the hat of blind chance, as it were, Nietzsche has pulled the utmost necessity—everything that happens happens of necessity, and happens of necessity an infinite number of times. Thus Zarathustra affirms in the fourth speech of Part III of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "‘By chance’—that is the most ancient nobility of the world, and this I restored to all things: I delivered them from their bondage under Purpose."<sup>45</sup> A place for certainty—indeed, for mathematical certainty—could be retained in science by way of probability and its laws.

The idea of the eternal recurrence is Platonic in the sense that it presupposes or entails the most radical denial of the senses, which testify to the reality of "substance" and "matter."<sup>46</sup> It is also Platonic in the sense that it is an account of the intrinsic order which makes the world

<sup>43</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 547.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 546.

<sup>45</sup> *Zarathustra*, p. 278 (pt. 3, aph. 4).

<sup>46</sup> See *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 22 (aph. 14).

a whole. Nietzsche finds such an intrinsic order by assuming the rule of what one would have thought to be the very principle of disorder—chance. If the world is as it is by chance, then it must be as Nietzsche says it is by necessity. Nietzsche achieves, it might seem, what was for Plato unattainable but nevertheless an ideal, a comprehension of the whole, by assuming as the principle of the whole that which would appear to be the most hostile to a rational account of the whole.